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SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: INDIAN FOREIGN MINISTER TO HOLBROOKE: WANT YOU TO  
SUCCEED IN AFGHANISTAN AND PAKISTAN

Classified By: Leslie Viguerie for Reasons 1.4 (B, D)

¶1. (C) In a February 16 meeting with Special Representative Richard Holbrooke and Ambassador Mulford, External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee, who is also acting Prime Minister, congratulated the United States on the election of President Obama. Mukherjee made the following points on U.S.-India engagement on Afghanistan and Pakistan issues:

-- India wants the United States to succeed in Afghanistan and Pakistan;

-- With an eye on the approaching elections in Afghanistan, India wants to see strong development of democratic norms and institutions in the country; and

-- India favors an integrated approach to solving the Afghanistan and Pakistan problems.

¶2. (C) Special Representative Holbrooke pledged complete transparency with India on what the United States considers and does in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

¶3. (C) Underscoring Indian stakes in stability in Afghanistan, Mukherjee reviewed the range and scope of Indian assistance to that country. He highlighted the Indian engagement in Afghanistan's power and road sectors as well as the 250,000 tons of wheat that India has recently pledged to provide to Afghanistan. On the Zaranj road that links the Iranian port of Bandar Abbas to the western Afghanistan hub of Herat, Mukherjee said India completed the project against stiff opposition from the Taliban which did not want the road to be built. The toll was heavy, according to Mukherjee, with the Taliban killing 11 Indians and 29 Afghans -- 1.5 kilometers for every life lost -- during the construction. Mukherjee also spoke about India's broad engagement in Afghanistan's power sector, with work on dams, transmission lines, distribution systems, substations, and training.

¶4. (C) On the political process in Afghanistan, Mukherjee recommended the Bangladesh caretaker government model where power is transferred to an interim caretaker administration a few months before the election to ensure perceptions of a free and fair process. Referring to a fractured opposition, he noted that the opposition needs to agree to a "common candidate" if it is to be competitive in the coming national elections.

¶5. (C) On Indo-Pakistan relations, Mukherjee described his May 2008 visit to Islamabad where he met then-President Pervez Musharraf, Prime Minister Yousuf Gilani and political leaders Asif Zardari, Nawaz Sharif and Asfandyar Wali Khan. Noting that one cannot choose a neighbor, he said India will work with the cards it has been dealt. He observed emphatically that India wants peace and stability within Pakistan. Mukherjee suggested that one of Pakistan's problems has been the dominant role of the military. He contrasted that to the civil-military relationship in India where the military is completely subservient to the civilian leadership. He expressed some puzzlement at this divergence because both peoples are "from the same stock."

¶6. (C) Holbrooke accepted Mukherjee's offer of Indian input to the U.S. strategic review of Afghanistan and Pakistan policy. They agreed that Foreign Secretary Menon would visit Washington in this regard at a time not yet specified.

¶7. (U) Ambassador Holbrooke has cleared this message.

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